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Our Dwindling Forests

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Our Dwindling Forests

WHEN I was a boy, I used to stand on a strip of land that jutted out into the sea at just the point where Pangil Bay widened out into the larger gulf which in turn opened out into the Mindanao Sea. It was a charming place. On one side across the narrow channel were the mountains of Lanao, wooded from mountaintop to water's edge. On the other side beyond a stretch of fertile rice land were the magnificent Malindang mountains with their peaks rising many thousand feet.

That (despite what students think) was not a very long time ago. Today the mountains are still there but the forests have dwindled. The slopes are for the most part denuded. The woodlands have retreated to the mountain-tops.

In many places what was virgin forest twenty years ago is now eroded land, denuded of top soil. A distinguished expert in anthropological geography, Professor Karl Pelzer of Yale, visited the place some seven years ago and remarked to my brother: "It won't be long before all of Malindang will be dumped into Pangil Bay." He was exaggerating of course but his point was clear: with the forests gone and with farming methods defective, all of the top soil will eventually be washed down by the rains into the sea.

I mention this merely as one tiny example of how quickly and surely and in what vast amounts the splendid forests of the Philippines are disappearing and how the fertile lands may eventually become desert.

The enormous and rapid loss of our forests was brought to the attention of the nation in a spectacular way only two months ago. The last two weeks of December and the first two weeks of January saw an unprecedented amount of rainfall over the southern half of the Philippines, from the southern tip of Luzon to Mindanao. The floods that resulted were perhaps without parallel in the country's history. We have had floods before but never over such a wide area at once.

The suffering and loss that such floods entail are incalculable. The loss of life was heavy, the loss of crops enormous, the damage to property, private and public immense. In Sorsogon transportation was paralyzed as some six rivers overflowed their banks and roads and bridges were destroyed; seventeen were reported dead, ten injured and two missing; 68 houses were des-

troyed and the total damage to public and private property estimated at three million pesos. In Iloilo the crop losses were estimated at ₱3,400,000 and the death toll eight. In Antique and in Negros Occidental (where six towns were under water) the amount of damage was estimated at five millions. Ten persons were drowned in Masbate, scores were injured, some 466 families rendered homeless and some ₱400,000 worth of crops destroyed. But the widest area of damage was in Mindanao. There were floods in Agusan, Bukidnon, Cotabato, Davao, Lanao, Misamis Oriental and Surigao. Some 26 were reported killed, scores injured, some 30,000 people rendered homeless, millions of pesos were lost in crops and property.

We are happy to note that relief services were quickly organized. The Red Cross, the social welfare administration and the armed forces went rapidly into action. But more important for our present discussion was the report made by a survey team sent by the President to Mindanao to assess the damage. The team was placed under the secretary of national defense, Mr. Eulogio Balao, and the chief of staff of the armed forces, Lt. Gen. Alfonso Arellano. The gist of their report was made public in the form of a warning: unless the rapid deforestation of Mindanao is halted, there will be bigger and more destructive floods.

The outcry in the press that resulted from this warning was considerable. There were many things noted in support of the warning. It was noted for instance that Mindanao, which should be immune from floods as it is outside the typhoon belt, has been suffering from destructive floods recently. In the past year alone three destructive floods occurred. It was further noted that the increased floods were coincidental with the rapid denudation of timberland caused by the boom in the export of logs to Japan. Indeed it was noted that while some bridges were washed away by the force of the rushing waters, other bridges were knocked down by the force of the logs themselves as the angry waters hurled them down to the sea.

The logging boom became more concretely realized when figures were published. In 1949, before the barter trade agreement with Japan, 43.4 million board feet were exported abroad; during the past year the figure had risen to 726 million board feet. Similarly, during the year before the passage of the no-dollar-import law, the amount of logs exported abroad was recorded at \$628,143; but from October 1955 to October 1956, after

that law took effect, the figure jumped up to 20 times its former volume and the logs exported amounted to \$10,184,188.

This increase in exports is of course not reprehensible in itself: indeed any increase in exports would be very commendable, were it not for the fact that our forest reserves are being depleted at the rate of 30,000 hectares a year and the work of reforestation is in no way equal to make up for the loss.

The gravity of the situation became plainer as officials of the department of agriculture and natural resources, with commendable candor, began to release the facts. It began to appear that the destruction of our forests was not only rapid: it was also wanton.

There was talk of "indiscriminate logging," of "fly by night concessioners," of "invasions" even of areas intended as national parks and forest preserves. The secretary of agriculture and natural resources, Mr. Juan de G. Rodriguez, appealed to holders of forest concessions to practice "judicious logging." A similar wish was expressed by the social welfare administratrix, Mrs. Amparo Villamor who called for "restrictive logging." The undersecretary of agriculture, Mr. Jaime Ferrer, stressed the need of legislation to define which areas should be set aside as permanent forests and which areas converted into agricultural land. The director of the bureau of forestry, Mr. Felipe Amos, spoke of the inability of the bureau to exercise effective control over the forests.

To understand the problem it seems to us that we should divide it into its components. The problem is mainly twofold: reforestation and conservation, and this latter may be subdivided into several subsidiary problems.

The first problem is that of reforestation of areas already denuded. There are only 39 reforesting stations in the country and only one in Mindanao (in Zamboanga which incidentally was not seriously affected by the recent floods). Only ₱1,600,000 are spent yearly for reforestation and it is estimated that at the present rate the work of reforestation will require ten centuries to complete.

The other problem is that of conserving the forests, and this in turn involves other problems. There is first of all the perennial problem of the *kaingin*. There is secondly the wanton destruction caused by irresponsible loggers who wish to cut as many logs as possible in as brief time as possible in order to take advantage

of the logging boom to Japan. This problem is further complicated by the fact that licenses are granted for brief periods only, so that the concession-holder is tempted to strip the forests as quickly as possible before his lease expires. The director of forestry, Mr. Amos, has put the matter neatly: some concessioners treat the forests as if they were mines (to be stripped of their ores) instead of as crops (to be harvested at recurrent intervals).

The irresponsible destruction of the forests—by *kaingin* or by unrestricted logging—could be prevented if applications for concessions were screened more thoroughly and if an effective force of forestry guards were maintained to enforce forestry regulations. But it would seem that neither screening nor guarding is possible in the present set-up. As regards the screening, the bureau of forestry professes itself “swamped” with applications. Some 1500 licenses are issued each year. The average concessions would include some 3,000 hectares of timberland but some concessioners it would seem are granted as much as 30,000 hectares. There is talk of “pressure” being brought to bear by legislators or others interested in the granting of concessions. And there is also talk of aliens taking a hand in the matter by supplying machinery and equipment to applicants who can obtain licenses only if they have such equipment.

As regards the enforcing of forestry regulations, an adequate patrol force cannot be maintained. The bureau of forestry considers 800 hectares as the area which one forest guard can effectively control: but there are only 800 forest guards who must consequently patrol an average of 30,000 hectares each. There is even a move to reorganize the various bureaus which would reduce the number of forest guards to 400, doubling the average area for each.

A note of humor was introduced into the discussion when the weather bureau announced with apparent solemnity that the recent destructive floods were caused not by deforestation but by the rains. Perhaps it will not be necessary to point out that though there would be no floods without rains, yet the rains need not cause floods if there were artificial barriers (river-control) and natural barriers (forests) to prevent the rapid and excessive overflow of water.

There are thus three problems which need immediate attention and immediate action. The first is reforestation. The second is forest conservation. The third is flood-control. There are some (and they are probably right) who would shift emphasis

from the first to the second of the problems mentioned above: first of all conserve what we now have; and meanwhile continue replanting the denuded areas. It is said that from ten to fifteen million pesos are needed to solve the problem of the forests: the problem is so important and so urgent that even if fifty millions were needed, the country must find means to raise the amount.

There is no lack of plans proposed to meet the situation. One of the local papers asked in an editorial: "Salvador Araneta, when he was secretary of agriculture and natural resources, proposed a plan for forest conservation. It was a good plan. What happened to it?" More recently a six-point program was offered by lumbermen through Mr. Gaudencio Antonino, president of an association of producers and exporters. The six points are not new but they merit consideration. They are: 1) Establish boundaries for permanent forests. 2) Require present holders of concessions to delineate tentative areas within their holdings which, upon inspection and approval by the bureau of forestry, are to be declared permanent forests. 3) Permanent forests are to remain permanent unless reclassified by act of congress, and congress may not reclassify any area without holding public hearings. 4) "Proven and reliable concessioners" should be given renewable lease terms of at least 25 years. 5) Emphasis should be placed on forest protection and conservation rather than on reforestation. 6) Strict enforcement of the *kaingin* laws.

The fourth point above is obviously to the interest of the lumber concessioners who now have to be content with very brief leases: but it is arguable that the longer lease would be better for the country than the shorter. The brief lease is a temptation to get as much out of the forests as possible before the lease expires. The longer lease might be an inducement to more judicious logging and to the replanting of trees. We might also commend the practice in Maryland and elsewhere of giving monetary reward to landowners and lease-holders who plant trees on their holdings.

The outcry in the papers has now died down and the attention of the reading public has been directed to other things: to secret political pacts, to political coalitions and realignments, to the release of imported concentrates, and to some sensational murders. The problem of the forests might soon be forgotten. It was noted that the President's State of the Nation address at the opening of congress contained no mention of the forest problem. Even more ominous was the reported failure of congressmen and forest

concessioners to attend a conference convoked by the secretary of agriculture and natural resources to discuss the problem of the forests. The secretary convoked that conference on the eve of the opening of congress. It was to have been attended by officials of the bureau of forestry and of the department of agriculture, by forestry experts, by logging concessioners, by public works experts and by the legislators concerned: namely, the senate and house committees on agriculture and forestry. It is said that few of the concessioners and none of the legislators bothered to attend the conference.

The problem is serious. It grows more serious with time. It requires positive, constructive statemanship to grapple with it. We commend it to our national leaders and to our legislators. Our forests are part of the national heritage: it would be criminal to dissipate this heritage.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

Soldiers Impersonating a Priest

IN a celebrated murder case which continues to occupy the headlines in the papers, the agents of the law in a very laudable effort to get to the bottom of the case have been reported to have used means which can only be termed shocking.

The facts as reported in the press are as follows: a certain driver called Purisimo Cielo, having given conflicting testimony regarding his part in the murder of a matron, is said while under constabulary custody to have expressed a desire to go to confession to a priest. Whereupon a soldier donned a cassock and posed as a priest to whom then Cielo is said to have "confessed" the details of the crime, the "confession" meanwhile being recorded on tape. The details of the confession were then divulged, as was also the tape recording of the "confession."

The chief of the constabulary, General Cabal, later denied the story. He said that there had been a confession and that the confession was tape-recorded but that it had not been obtained in the manner described. Officials at Camp Crame however were subsequently reported to have admitted that a soldier did put on the cassock of a priest and in that guise pretended to give a "blessing" to the accused but that it had "nothing to do" with the confession that Cielo had made.